

THE
CHRIS FOSS
PORTFOLIO



— T H E —
CHRIS FOSS
P O R T F O L I O





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CHRIS FOSS



CHRIS FOSS



Chris Foss is probably best known for the fleet of vast, intricately detailed and distinctly travel-worn spaceships he unleashed upon an unsuspecting science fiction world in the early 1970s. Almost overnight the face of space hardware as it appeared on book covers and in films was transformed as other illustrators and conceptual designers borrowed or simply stole his original concept. Foss' private vision of the future suddenly became almost the norm, and not always with due credit being given.

Looking back on it now, Foss is philosophical about the rip-off: 'It was a shame in a way' he says, 'because if I had managed to keep the idea to myself I could have plodded along with it happily into old age. The trouble with publishing is that as soon as an idea catches on everyone leaps onto the bandwagon, saturates the market and so creates the need for a new fashion.'

The strange thing is that despite the glut and subsequent collapse of demand for Foss-type space hardware, only his imitators fell by the wayside. The demand in science fiction for the man himself as both illustrator and film concept designer remained steady. If anything it has grown over the years, up to and including a new venture he is embarking on. Which is ironic because back in 1970 one of his most important art directors told him gloomily over lunch that science fiction was not going to last.

However, space hardware has never been Chris Foss' sole preoccupation. Perhaps the biggest surprise to most of his admirers, when they first learn of it, is that he was the illustrator of Dr Alex Comfort's popular *Joy of Sex* and its successor *More . . .* Between them these two books have earned Foss more than all his spaceships put together and, curiously, as publishing phenomena have echoed the tale of his space pictures, having spawned a host of imitators which over the years have faded away leaving the originals as recognized classics. They have also done much to fund the railway he has built at his Dorset home.

This is no little toy on whose engine the driver perches like some joyriding troll as it sedately circles the front lawn, but a working industrial line with a gauge of two feet. This is similar to that at Ffestiniog in Wales, for example, or the

one currently being used to drive the tunnel under the English Channel. The aim is to use the railway for transporting the materials Foss will need for a proposed venture into sculpture on an industrial scale – massive constructs to liven up new architectural developments.

The love of railways, which often eclipses his love of art, goes back to Foss' childhood in Devon. He was born in 1946 and much of his formative years was spent riding on the quiet country railways around him. At the same time, encouraged by his art master at school, he began sketching not only these railways and other relics of an industrial revolution which then littered the West Country, but also, strongly influenced by Graham Sutherland, landscapes. This led to his abiding passion – machines in landscapes.

Later, encouraged by the same teacher, he won a scholarship to a public school in Dorset. He escaped as often as possible to sketch the semi-derelict shipyards and harbour at nearby Poole. While visiting family on Guernsey, where he spent some time as a child, he also became fascinated by the remains of the German occupation there during World War Two – the crumbling concrete bastions which briefly transformed the island into a sea fortress.

All these interests were later to shape his characteristic vision of the future as a place just as battered, messy and complicated as the present. This, in the end, has been Chris Foss' unique contribution to the portrayal of the future – he looked at it from beyond, as it were. Stripped of the sparkling, chimerical aura of untested dreams, his spaceships, robots and futuristic buildings are seen through the rather jaded eyes of one fully aware of the frailty and limitations of what he or she sees.



It is interesting to speculate on Chris Foss' subsequent output had his interest in art only extended to sketching the shiny new cars down in the local showroom. His wish was always to be an artist, but the usual mundane pressures brought to bear on youthful idealism resulted in his going from school to Cambridge University in 1964 to study architecture. Idealism struck back, though, and two thirds of the way through the course Foss

abandoned it for his original dream.

Despite some early success with a cartoon strips in *Penthouse* and in local newspapers, making a living from art was not an immediate option. So he took a job as a draughtsman and designer for an architectural sculptor in London, producing drawings for mould assemblies and visualizations of murals for new buildings. This included assembling sculptures on site. To this day there are bits of Foss littering 60s architecture. One such example can be found on the back doors of Liverpool Cathedral. By 1968, totally driven by the need to be a working artist, he took to supporting himself, his wife Pat and new-born daughter Imogene by driving hire-cars between working on a speculative book project.

Twelve rather tricky months later his lucky break arrived in the form of a commission for a hardback book cover. This led to Foss joining an enterprising artists' agency, since when he has never looked back. Apart from the occasional use of sub-agents he has since been pretty much a one-man band, which is the way he likes it.

To begin with his cover illustrations were from a wide range of subjects. Being a novice he simply accepted any work he was given and did it as best he could – gradually, warfare and catastrophe of any era emerged as his speciality. In Foss' own opinion his World War Two pictures are equal to any others he produced at the time. However, it was his paintings of the future which caught the public imagination and which suddenly were in demand. Within a couple of years science fiction had almost taken over completely. The rampant success of his book covers soon led to his being equally in demand as a film concept designer, leading to work on *Superman*, *Flash Gordon*, *Alien* and an aborted version of Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

Since the 1970s space hardware has eased more and more into the background of Foss' work, giving way to people and landscapes: 'Becoming more narrative', as he puts it. It is a trend he expects to continue and is quite happy with. For a while in the early 1980s, and in the fond belief that it would accelerate his output, Foss tried employing assistants to mix paint and block out



the main areas of colour on the large (3' x 2' 6") boards he usually uses. Sadly he found himself spending so much time going over what they had done that it was simpler to go back to working alone.

His usual medium is acrylic paint on illustration board, though occasionally he will add other media and will experiment with any new material that catches his eye. Finished paintings usually bear little resemblance to the rough artwork as he improvises all the way, letting accident and inspiration shape the original concept. When airbrushing he still uses acrylic paint even though its quick-drying nature makes it 'the most hostile material to use in an airbrush'. But his use of the airbrush has diminished steadily over the years and he prefers to rely on larger and larger brushes for expanses of colour. At the completion of a painting all the rough drafts are usually thrown away.

Unusually for his line of illustration, Chris Foss uses photographic reference material only as a means of last resort, preferring to work purely from inspiration and memory. This rule had to be suspended for the *Joy* books however as the pace (in the first case, 130 drawings in two months) dictated last resort methods from the outset.

Apart from illustration, film concepts, railway building and industrial sculpture, does Mr Foss have any other ambitions for the immediate future? Certainly: 'To be a seat-of-the-pants comic publisher'. Plans are already well underway for the launch of such a venture. In the light of his previous record it's worth betting at least a fiver on the project's success.







1
TRIANGULAR SPACESHIP
(1974)

Possibly inspired the triangular spaceships in
Star Wars.





2
EASTER ISLAND
(1988)





3

TRAVELLING CITIES
(1981)

Cities that run on rails.





4

FIRST SPACESHIPS ON QUATOR
(1969)



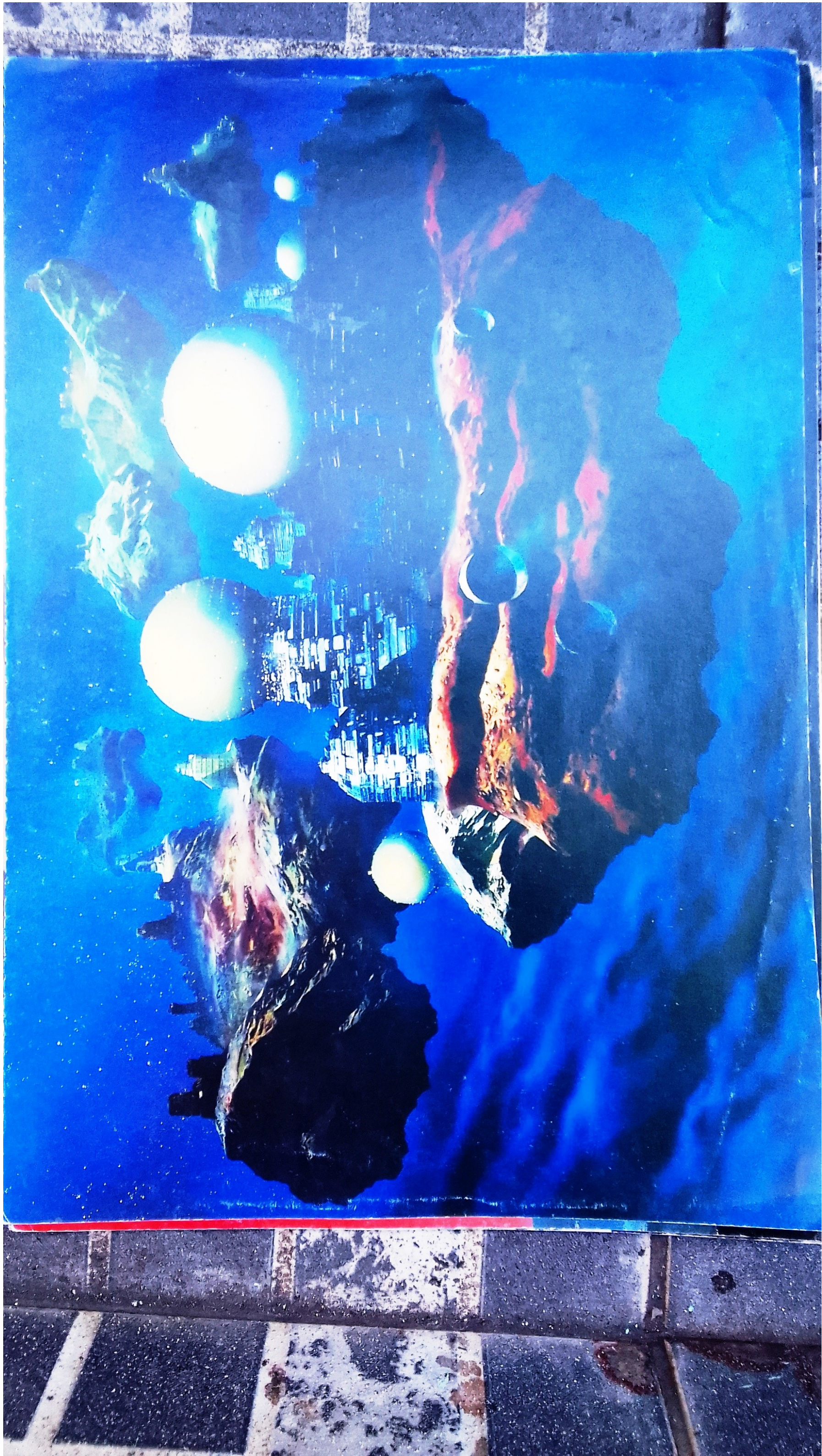


5
GARGANTUA
(1974)





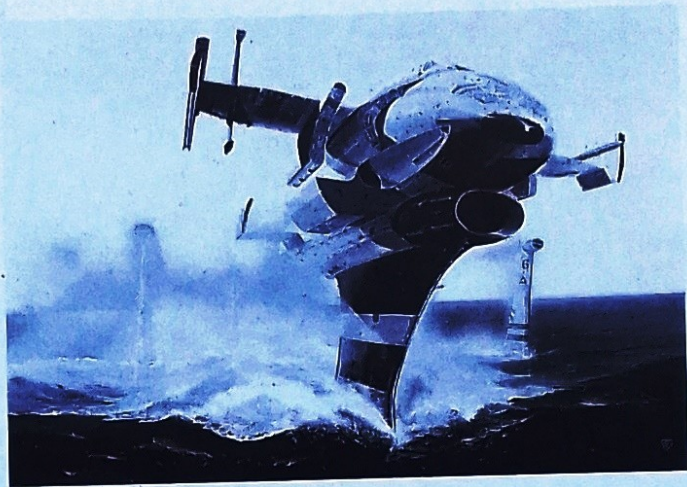
6
RAILRUNNER
(1969)





7
FLOATING CITIES
(1981)





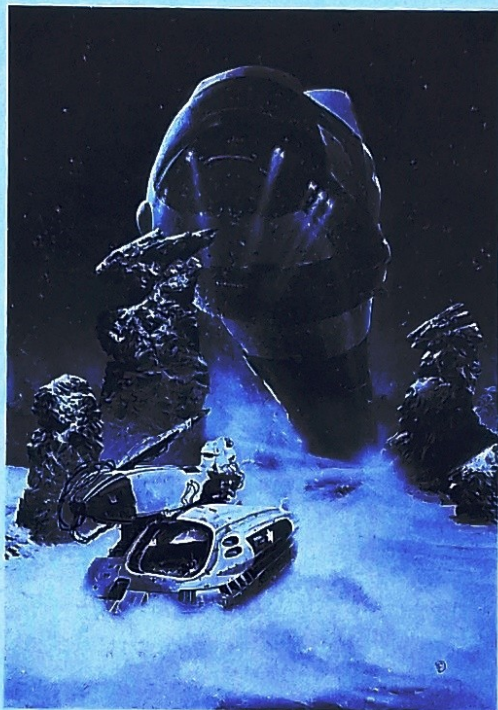
8

FUTURISTIC OIL TANKER
(1970)

Its hull and payload are below the surface.



F



9
FLEEING SNO-CAT
(1974)





10
BREAKER'S YARD
(1974)





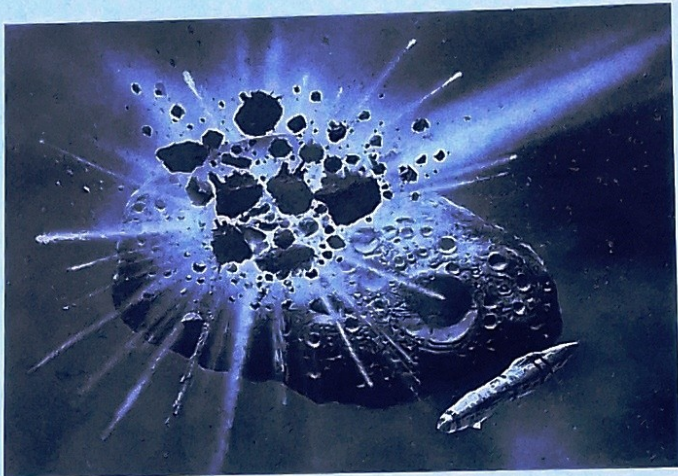
11
VOYAGE TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET
(1989)



11

VOYAGE TO THE FORBIDDEN PLANET
(1989)





12
ASTEROID COLLISION
(1987)





13
SHIPS OF THE LINE
(1974)





14
ANTARES DARN
(1988)





15
ICEBERGS IN SPACE
(1989)





16
VENICE/LA TOWERS
(1989)





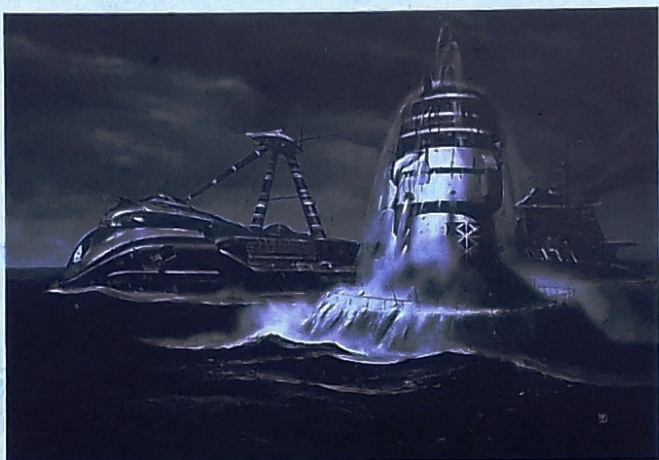
17
THE UFONAGHTS
(1970)





18
THE SENTINEL
(1975)





19
NAPOLEON'S SUBMARINE
(1972)





20

WATERLEE STRANDED, PERU
(1987)

A true incident.





21
FIRELANCE
(1986)





11
12
13





23
FIREBALL
(1989)





24
KILLING MACHINE
(1986)







26
EIGHTY-MINUTE HOUR
(1987)





27
BEYOND THE HILLS OF PEACE
(1982)



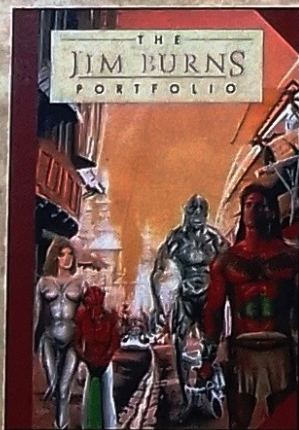


28
TURNER SPACESHIP
(1979)

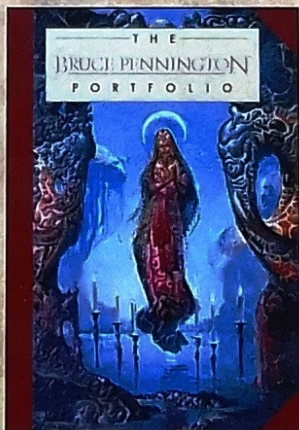


CHRIS FOSS is best known for his vast and travel-worn spaceships of a decaying future. This portfolio features twenty-eight spectacular full-page images representing some of the very best of Chris Foss' work to date.

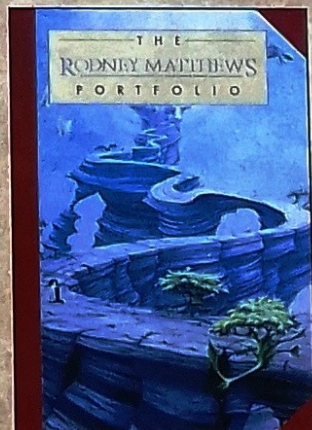
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